

## *Investing in God's Promise*

Jeremiah 32: 1-15    Luke 16: 19-31

It is the thing that makes people wake up early in the morning, drag themselves from the comfort of their snuggly, soft bed, and off to the day's chores. It is the material that people spend much of their lives seeking to acquire, only to see it disappear in quick order. It is the value that brings power and prestige. It is - - [play "*For the Love of Money*" intro]

Having had several stories and parables that dance around the question of money and what we do with it in recent weeks, this morning our scriptures take us head-on into the most sensitive area of discussion – faith and money.

Why is it so sensitive? Why is anything made “sensitive”? Because it rubs the wrong way against what we know and believe. By now, we should be used to the radical demands of the gospel and the clash of worldly ways with Kingdom ways. We can cope with most of it, like turning the other cheek because we aren't getting smacked in the face too often – we can live with that one – or showing hospitality and respect for someone whose life has been very different from ours – that can be a bit of an adventure in “being nice.” But the faith-and-money talk goes straight to the most sensitive part of our body, the wallet.

Today's topic focuses on the question of what we have invested in. This refers to the excess funds that we have laid away for the sake of our security, stability, and well-being. If you have enough excess funds, you might become an investor. You would have people like those on the bulletin cover making deals for you. Even if you're a passive investor in mutual funds like I am in my own small way, then people like this are wheeling and dealing on your behalf. Their job is to make you more money, or conversely to keep you from losing money. The idea is that *my money* should make me *more money*. We want a return on our investment – the ROI. We all understand and accept that. In fact, we never give a single thought to questioning the values behind that sacred creed of our society – use your money to make *more* money for yourself.

As you have already guessed, that isn't an interest for God, nor is it what Jesus taught, even though it is truly a sacred tenet of our society and one of its primary values that carries over into all kinds of other domains.

We start with the story of Jeremiah getting paid a visit by cousin Hanamel. It isn't the prophet's birthday; it isn't a holy day; some tragedy in the family? Who knows what might have happened? With the Babylonians preparing their armies outside the city to lay waste to Jerusalem, this is a tense time.

It's also a tense time for Jeremiah since, voicing defiant remarks about King Zedekiah's foreign policy decisions, he remains under house arrest for his treasonous talk. Palace prophets like Jeremiah are supposed to say nice things that the king *wants*

to hear, even though nice things aren't always the truth. Jeremiah says what God told him to say, because one ought to fear God more than any king.

Yet here is cousin Hanamel visiting amidst this turmoil. The prophet's cousin wants to sell off a property in nearby Anathoth. Jeremiah is the nearest relative and it's a matter of **family obligation** that Jeremiah purchase this land.

This request comes when you can imagine real estate prices are so bad you may not be able to *give away* property. With the Babylonian army poised to strike, the truth is that real estate doesn't sell well in a war zone. Doubtless Cousin Hanamel is simply looking for some fast money, indeed some get-out-town money.

Why doesn't Jeremiah just say 'no?' The land is worthless. The Babylonians are sure to conquer the city and nothing will be the same, maybe ever. Whoever isn't killed will probably get carted off to enslavement. Why bother with this nonsense now?

Of course, this purchase has nothing to do with real estate or making money or getting a sound investment. This is a prime example of God's idea of a **kingdom investment**. Jeremiah buys the land as a witness to hope.

When all seems lost and despair has set in, Jeremiah lives by faith in the promise of God. As a sign of the future, a symbol of hope, he recklessly invests in the promise of God's future. It's a mere morsel of hope and faith that trusts in the promise of God, in God's strength and wisdom, not the weakness of Judah, not the corruptness of its kings, not the destruction of Jerusalem, not the power of the Babylonian Empire. Jeremiah has made it clear; God is sovereign over all that, and his faith is in God alone. Jeremiah refuses to heed worldly wisdom in investing. He refuses to think like Hanamel; he refuses to accept that Babylon will determine the future. In this crazy act, Jeremiah invests faithfully in God's promise.

The investment counsel from our Kingdom investment adviser would sound at this point rather irresponsible. Invest in God's promise? Um, this looks like a full-blown loser to me. What purpose does it serve? What benefit does it provide the investor? We need to learn more.

Jesus has a parable for us to consider in our reading from Luke. There is a rich man who enjoys fine clothes, fine food, and of course, a fine home. There is also a poor, disgusting, man who begs at the rich man's gate, is covered with sores licked by dogs, and exists on food scraps discarded by the rich man.

We have an implicit tip-off about this story. The rich man has no name; he is simply "that rich guy," the guy who is like all the rich guys who really don't care about the poor and suffering. The poor beggar man has a name, Lazarus. The tip-off is the reversal here. No one knows the poor beggar's name; no one cares. But *everyone* knows the rich man's name; he's Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos.

In Jesus' time, common wisdom ascribed God's blessings to the rich man who is respected and privileged. Conversely, the beggar would be seen as condemned to grinding poverty by God for his sinfulness, and be regarded by the people with scorn, derision, and contempt. The beggar is a **mess**, but the rich man is a **success**.

We aren't that far off today, heaping scorn and derision on the homeless, immigrants, and poor, blaming them for bad habits and bad decisions that justly *earned* them their poverty and transiency. By the same token, our culture believes the rich worked hard, were somehow gifted, and justly *earned* all their wealth. To suggest otherwise is civil and social heresy!

In Jesus' telling of the story, both the beggar and the rich man die. The beggar is escorted to heaven by the angels of God to stand with Abraham. The rich man is dumped in the torment of the smoking fires of Hades.

Wait a minute! Maybe Jesus got that backwards? Shouldn't the rich man, the successful, respected, and privileged man, receive the blessing of heaven and stand with Abraham? And shouldn't the beggar, a despised, contemptible parasite, be inflicted with the torment of Hades? This isn't right, Jesus' audience would say.

Even today, those who can pay for their housing, their meals, their car, and their health insurance, wonder why those begging bums don't stand on their own two feet and get a job. They hold the same contemptuous attitude as the "rich man" in Jesus' story. They may even faithfully attend church.

The story could have ended there, just as the parable of the prodigal son could have ended with the son's return into the loving arms of his father. Ah, but wait, there's more!

The rich man looked up from Hades and saw Abraham in the distance, and that beggar Lazarus standing with him in heaven. (Again, the beggar is clearly named Lazarus, and thereby known by God, but the rich man *still* has **no name**, a **stranger**, **unknown** to God.) The rich man called out, "*Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.*"

The rich man's request shows **no learning has occurred** for him about this reversal of fortune. The once-rich man wants relief and expects Abraham to get Lazarus to do his bidding. Abraham explains, in effect, that the ways of the world no longer apply. That life is over for both the rich man and Lazarus.

The dialogue continues as the rich man wants his five brothers warned. Abraham refuses because if they won't heed the law and the prophets (the Hebrew scriptures of our Old Testament), if they ignore the word of God, nothing will convince them, not even one rising from the dead. (That line gives up another tip-off that this last piece was edited long after Jesus' own crucifixion and resurrection.)

Do we understand now what it means to invest in the Kingdom? It would be nice to have a manual, but instead Jesus has given us teachings like this to make pretty clear what investing in God's promise means.

Rather than traders at the New York Stock Exchange shouting and clamoring to buy and sell shares of stock to benefit well-off investors, it would be very different. With the priority of making as much money as possible for the investor, investing in the promise of God means focusing on and locating the promise of God in those who haven't been able to realize that promise in their lives and investing in them.

The exchange floor would instead be bustling with investors who would be eager to invest in housing for the homeless, health care for the sick, support for those with aging parents or with very young children, investing in new energy technologies, in cleaning the oceans, in rehabilitating inmates, in working with the developmentally and physically disabled, in aiding victims of natural disasters, in services that turn peoples' lives around, in caring for the well-being and betterment of all ... instead of making more money for those who have an excess of it to begin with. If we see that God's promise is in each and every one of those items that I mentioned and a whole lot more, then we realize that investing in God's promise is not about getting a personally profitable return on our investment. Instead, this investment strategy is committed to fulfilling God's will for creation's abundance to be shared throughout all creation for the benefit, enjoyment, and empowerment of all.

'But Bruce,' you cry out, 'that's crazy. That will never happen.' As long as people professing Jesus as Lord and Savior cast aside his core teachings about the Kingdom and its promise of new life, then it will never happen. It can only happen when people actually believe in Jesus, in what he said and did and told us to do. That doesn't mean believing in Jesus for a free ticket to heaven, believing that Jesus says nice things about love and forgiveness and being nice and polite, or believing in the arcane points of some ancient creed. It means believing that his teaching and his Kingdom way can transform lives and transform the world, and nothing less.

Jesus paints a picture of what the Kingdom and Kingdom life is all about. Jeremiah does the same when he buys a useless parcel of land to invest in God's promise for God's people. Our investments reflect our values, and typically they aren't Kingdom values for any of us. They are worldly values. If we believe in Jesus, then our core values should be challenged.

Investing in God's promise is not done overnight, rather it is a long-term process of setting aside the world's values for the Kingdom's values. But it starts by believing that Jesus meant what he taught, and we need to learn his way into his promise of new life for us and for all.